

July 5, 2020

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

*"The Blessing of Burden"*

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 ~ Romans 7:15-25 ~ Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

As part of my chaplaincy rotation, I worked for a while on the psychiatric unit at a large Chicago hospital, where my time was divided between the adult acute unit and the geriatric unit. I planned activities for the patients, spent time with them, charted their progress. It was one of the most interesting jobs I've ever had. Patients came to us for a variety of reasons. Some had chemical imbalances and came to be stabilized so they could return home. Some, especially on the geriatric unit, were taking medications that conflicted with each other and were causing unexpected side effects. Others had been victims of abuse or neglect, at nursing homes, or in their own homes, or in relationships ... many had abused themselves ... and were staying with us because they weren't safe where they were.

It was a privilege for me to spend time with these people ... to get to know them ... to learn something about their stories. One very sweet lady on the geriatric unit came in several times because her medications caused her to see and feel bugs crawling on her. She knew they weren't real, but it was, literally, driving her crazy.

I couldn't begin to tell you how many people came to us ... or, more often, were sent to us ... because they had threatened or tried to take their own life. There was a common theme among these people of helplessness, isolation, and desperation. They were often quite lucid about it. They had assessed the reality of their situation and found no alternative. Life had brought them to that conclusion and, thankfully, to us.

There was an amazing spirit among the staff there ... a genuine compassion for the people under our care. There was not the sense of "us" and "them" ... no one acted like the patients were qualitatively different from anyone else. We were fully aware that the main separation

between us was genetics and circumstances. And it made us want to help. The Kingdom of God paraded down those halls on a daily basis ... and in the midst of terrible, helpless suffering ... there was an abundance of grace ... sometimes even deliverance. It was an amazing thing to witness the consistent, ongoing grace that happened there.

Not all the patients on these units were psychotic ... most weren't ... but they all suffered from, to a profound degree, an inability to negotiate the vast chasm between wholeness and their aching need. Who in *this* room ... or *any* room ... does this not describe? The particular needs ... the precise character of our brokenness varies from person to person. But who does not recognize something of themselves in the one who cannot keep his brokenness hidden? Our inadequacy may be the one human trait we all share.

I believe that is why we're uncomfortable when we see someone clumsily revealing what we so carefully hide. We shudder at the sight of the homeless person whose humiliating circumstances allow no private place ... we feel awkward around those who mourn, whose agony spills out, revealing a deep place inside of them. But the poor, the meek, the mentally ill, the estranged, the refugee ... they differ from the rest of us only in their urgency.

We heard from Paul today, from his letter to the Romans. I love this passage. It reveals probably the most modernist sensibility in all of Scripture. Its conception of the inward individual ... divided and at war with itself ... seems beyond its time. But Paul is on to something here. He looks within himself, with a lifetime of education in the Torah behind him ... but nothing to prepare him for the demands that Christ is making of him. And as he takes stock of himself ... it is a testament to his integrity that he faces the contradictions he finds within him without flinching.

Do you see how he wrestles in Chapter 7:20? "I do not understand my own actions. For I do ... not do what I want ... but the very thing I hate. With my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin."

He doesn't short-circuit this dilemma ... doesn't wriggle out with an easy answer. You can tell, through the tortured language, that he needs an answer to his situation ... a tough, durable answer that will hold up to the strain he is under. I can't think of a place in all of Scripture or literature or anywhere else that so baldly ... almost embarrassingly ... lays out the double-bind of the human condition. He's stuck. And he's torn ... between two forces larger than himself that threaten to tear him apart.

I don't think Paul is mentally unbalanced here ... at least no more than the rest of us. It is a deeply troubling thing to look honestly at ourselves and try to understand just who we really are. Just try it! To not be disturbed by the contradictions and turmoil of life would be a much greater sign that something is seriously wrong. But self-awareness is a dangerous thing. George Eliot probably put it best. She wrote, "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity."

Well, I certainly consider myself one of the well-wadded ones. The point she's making here is that an extreme over-sensitivity to human suffering would make life unbearable, so we insulate ourselves against it as best we can. It's a valid point, but many of us go long stretches without the least hint of that "roar which lies on the other side of silence." And that in itself can suggest that important parts of ourselves are going unattended. When we refuse the kind of introspection that leads to repentance, we miss the abundant life that lies on the other side.

Jesus faced the same sorts of tensions, both within himself and in those around him. He spent time alone with God, plumbing the deepest recesses, the most gossamer reaches, of his own heart. Among other things, Jesus was the most authentic human who ever lived. He knew who he was, and the forces which raged around him could not shake that.

He also knew the fear in those who opposed him. He recognized their cynicism and the games it led them to play. They knew that their religious practice had not brought them peace, so the

Law of Moses was reduced from being God's way for their lives ... to being simply an academic pursuit ... or a means of control and manipulation. Why else would they be such sticklers about minute aspects of the law, and completely miss the humanity around them?

And Jesus had a problem with that. He compared them to children, who know the words to nursery rhymes, but don't know what they mean. They knew how to take offense and find fault, but they lacked discernment and judgment. *"John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, 'He has a demon;' the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom," Jesus says, "is vindicated by her deeds."*

It's an unhealthy situation when those who are vested with the power to assign value, create meaning, and interpret events around us become cynical and lack the discretion which comes from true self-knowledge. It's still dangerous when the wise men and women are not heard, and our fate is left in the hands of children. But real self-knowledge is hard-won, demands constant vigilance, and is not always rewarded the way we'd like. It requires patience and discernment and courage and a desire truly to know. People who seek it often become less conventional, less inclined to follow the herd, and eventually more confident following their own judgment.

There is an old saying that the opposite of a small truth is an untruth ... but the opposite of a deep truth is ... another truth. It requires a different way of thinking when we dip below the surface of sound-bytes and images ... when we look past conventional wisdom and what the crowd says ... and wrap ourselves around the deep paradoxes of our lives. On this weekend, when we have just celebrated the glory of our independence, we must always remember that freedom and responsibility are inextricably connected ... that we must lose our lives to gain our lives ... that the one who would lead must be servant to all. It's certainly not an easy thing to do because these things create tension in us ... they throw us and make things difficult to control and predict. They seem nonsensical and go against our normal ways of living. It takes a courageous person to accept the notion that one must give up power and position to gain

success. And yet, on a deeper level, we all know that these things are true. In those moments of extremity ... those moments we are acutely living right now ... when the world seems raw and we're not able to apply our easy explanations, the tensions that normally remain below the surface are laid bare.

It will help in such times of uncertainty to follow Jesus' cue, to reach out, to recognize that we are part of a community, a tradition, which often can supply that "larger love" that helps us endure ... even grow ... in the tension of opposites.

It's difficult to pin down the exact emotions Jesus is expressing in the passage we heard this morning, but they are incarnational and beautiful human feelings to be sure! I can follow and serve a God who can experience these emotions that are so much part of my daily life. Jesus not only confronts, he also condemns. And then suddenly he changes direction. Matthew marks the change with a time check, "At that time Jesus said ..." I would love to ask Jesus what triggered the change? Did he notice a facial expression, did he experience a change of feeling tone? I will never know.

What I do know is that Jesus, having vented his anger at the hard of heart, non-responders then turned to a prayer of thanks to God for those who are able, because of their innocence and of their liminal lives full of pain, to hear and receive what is being offered.

The proud and arrogant, those who have all the answers, those who think they are "self-made" will never see and receive what the burdened and heavily laden ones will see and receive. There is something about the pain of human suffering that tills the soil for the fertile seed of Jesus' words.

What did these words change? If you ask the burdened heavily laden ones who have come to Jesus down through the ages, they will probably testify, that those words changed everything! My prayer is that his words will do that for you too!

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, thank you for the reminder of Jesus that fulfilment will only be found in taking on the yoke that fits correctly, putting our shoulder to the task for which we were created, and for the best news of all ... that being yoked to one who is gentle and humble in heart will enable our whole being to be at peace. Amen.